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SUBJECT: RUSSIA: THE SITUATION IN KALMYKIA IS ANYTHING BUT
CALM

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The predominantly Buddhist Republic of Kalmykia in Russia's Southern Federal District, headed by a chess-obsessed autocrat, has not been spared the corruption endemic to the rest of the country or the ethnic strife found in the nearby North Caucasus republics. Both the mayor of its capital Elista and one of his deputies have been charged with corruption and, at least temporarily, removed from their positions. Tension between the majority Kalmyk and minority Dagestani communities boiled over April 1-3 in the republic's southern city of Artesian and the Russian Orthodox Church has pressured minority Christian denominations even as it pays lip service publicly to religious tolerance. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) An April 21-23 visit to the southern Russian republic of Kalmykia found a sleepy province with an undercurrent of political intrigues typical of an authoritarian backwater. Elected shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kirsan Ilyumshinov has been president of Kalmykia since 1993. By most accounts, he has done little for the republic other than enjoin everyone to play chess. The republic, with an official population of around 300,000 inhabitants, is largely agrarian, although there are some deposits of poor quality oil and associated gas that the Russian company Lukoil is developing deep underground near its southern border with Dagestan. Its capital Elista is a run-down city with gutted roads even in the city center that prides itself on the building of Europe's largest Buddhist temple and a Potemkin-style Chess City, meant to attract the world's best chess players and their fans. The republic's rural population is moving to the capital, where Soviet-era factories have largely been shuttered, or elsewhere in the Russian Federation.

Tug of War Between the Republic's Two Leading Personalities

¶3. (SBU) A political tug of war has broken out between Kalmykia's President Kirsan Ilyumshinov and Elista's deposed mayor Radiy Burulov. In February, Kalmykia's Supreme Court released Burulov on a two million ruble bail after he was arrested in March 2008 on suspicion of giving a municipal contract in January 2006 to a building supply company indirectly owned by him. As a result of this contract, according to the internet-based Caucasian Knot media outlet, the city suffered losses of almost 700,000 rubles. On March 12 Burulov appeared before the Elista City Council, denied the charges made against him, accused Ilyumshinov of pressing for his resignation and demanded that he be "rehabilitated" and allowed to take up his duties as mayor once more. The city council voted overwhelmingly in favor of Burulov. Local newspapers quoted one pro-Burulov councilman as stating that "over the 16 years of Ilyumshinov's reign, Kalmykia has reached a state of total collapse and bankruptcy" and that with Ilyumshinov in power "Kalmykia has no future."

¶4. (SBU) Burulov is not the only municipal official to have found himself in trouble with the law. On April 18, police

in Kislovodsk in Stavropol Kray arrested Vladimir Tomutov, Elista's vice mayor for construction and capital investment, for whom an international arrest warrant had been issued. Tomutov, under suspicion of stealing 13 million rubles of city funds that were to have been used to construct a children's hospital and schools, had left Kalmykia in September 2008 in violation of a court order for him not to leave the republic. Police returned him to Elista the following day, according to the spokesman for the republic's Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Simmering Ethnic Tensions Boil Over in Southern Kalmykia

15. (SBU) Although Kalmykia's population is at least half ethnic Kalmyk, there is a large ethnic Russian minority approaching 40 percent. The next largest minority ethnic group is from nearby Dagestan and includes citizens of Kalmykia as well as temporary residents who have gone there to find work. Included in this group, according to Magomed Umalogov, the head of the Dagestani diaspora in Kalmykia, are herders who rent land in southern Kalmykia on which they maintain their livestock.

16. (SBU) According to Umalogov, on April 1 members of a criminal gang operating in the southern part of Kalmykia attacked two such herders from Dagestan to try to force them off the land they had rented. He said that on April 2, after the two were secretly brought to Dagestan for medical treatment, around 100 of their relatives and other residents of the Dagestani town of Khasavyurt, including at least two dozen women as well as its mayor and the local head of the

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FSB, drove across the border to Artesian to demand that the attackers be brought to justice. Umalogov was in Artesian on the afternoon of April 2 when the brief altercation came to a head and helped to diffuse it by having the Kalmyk authorities promise to conduct an investigation. He told us April 22 that no such investigation had been conducted. Analyst Andrey Serenko told Caucasian Knot that the conflict was a fight between rival Caspian Sea fish poachers and the law enforcement agencies that supported them. According to Serenko and Umalogov, the two areas in Kalmykia with the greatest amount of lawlessness are the Chernozemelskiy and Laganskiy regions along the Caspian coast.

17. (SBU) Umalogov was full of invective for ethnic Kalmyks. He painted a picture of them that was as far as possible from the peace-loving people you are led to believe when touring Elista's Buddhist Temple that dominates the central part of the capital, completed in 2005 and the largest in Europe. He said they treat members of Dagestan's ethnic groups poorly and often tell them to return to Dagestan because "Kalmykia is for Kalmyks." He noted that this is the second time that Kalmyks from Artesian had attacked non-Kalmyks. In October 2007, locals attacked a Tyumen-Baku train when it arrived in Artesian after a fight broke out in the restaurant car between Kalmyks and ethnic Azeris. Umalogov said that Kalmyks do not have a high tolerance for alcohol and drink too much of it. During our meeting over lunch, Umalogov received a call from the local FSB warning him about "saying too much to a visiting American diplomat."

Protestant Minorities, Muslims Face Difficulties

18. (SBU) Despite the recent creation of a Board for Religious Tolerance in which the leaders of Kalmykia's Buddhist, Russian Orthodox and Muslim communities participate and a highly publicized attempt to bridge the differences between the Russian Orthodox Church and small Protestant denominations, religious minorities have continued to face difficulties. The 60 members of the Seventh Day Adventists Church (14 of whom are school-age children) have been singled out for the harshest treatment. They have been attacked in

the local press as a "religious sect" and in March the city of Elista's Commission on Youth Affairs fined three parents 100 rubles each for refusing to send their children to school on Saturday. According to the Adventists' pastor Vitaliy Tikhomirov, in past years the city had been satisfied with a statement from the parents stating that their children would be under parental supervision attending church services during the mandatory half-day of classes on Saturday. Tikhomirov said that things may have changed and Adventist children targeted when a new elite high school named after an Orthodox saint went into operation this year and Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy led by Elista Archbishop Zozima stated that all children there should attend Saturday classes to achieve higher standards of education. He noted that the case had received wide (and mostly negative) publicity in the local media. Tikhomirov pointed out that the principal of the new school, an ethnic Kalmyk, had been interviewed on local television saying he supported mandatory attendance, although as late as last year when he was the head of another school he had supported Adventist children being allowed to attend Saturday church services.

¶9. (SBU) On April 24, the city court in Elista ruled that the three parents did not have to pay the 100 ruble fine levied against them by the city. A lawyer from the Slavic Law and Justice Center's St. Petersburg office represented the church member, an ethnic Azeri who became an Adventist several years ago and who brought the appeal of the administrative fine. While in Elista we had raised this case with the Ombudsman of the Kalmyk Republic, Vladislav Savisko, an ethnic Russian originally from Siberia. He was unaware of the case, because unlike the local 100-strong Jehovah's Witness church, the Adventists had never come to him with a problem. He agreed, however, that as Ombudsman he should protect the right of the Adventists to practice their religion without government interference. We suggested that although his small six-person office was busy on April 24 conducting a conference on the rights of handicapped people, someone should attend the court proceedings and report back to him. We do not know if anyone from the office was able to attend the proceedings. Tikhomirov's wife told us on April 29 that local representatives of the FSB visited the church and asked about our meeting with her husband and our interest in the church. Tikhomirov told us May 5 that he has again been summoned to appear before the Commission on Youth Affairs on May 7 and that Savisko had promised that someone from the Ombudsman's office would also be present.

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¶10. (SBU) Although they represent about five percent of the population, Kalmykia's Muslims have been stymied in their desire to build a mosque there. We visited a small prayer room outside of Elista, one of several in the republic. Umalogov and the proprietor of the Dagestani restaurant next to the prayer room (who had actually paid for most of its construction), complained that Kalmykia's mufti, Sultan-Akhmed Karalayev, had not yet convinced the government to allow the construction of a larger facility. Karalayev is based in Langan, situated on its small Caspian Sea coast, and failed to appear at our scheduled meeting in Elista.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) An undercurrent of tension remains in Kalmykia, exacerbated by the lack of competent local leadership. Eventually Medvedev will probably be forced to make the hard choice of getting rid of Ilyumshinov and replacing him with someone better suited to running the republic. We will continue to monitor the plight of religious minorities there and consult with the local Ombudsman if necessary.

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